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ABSTRACT

This research was undertaken with the idea that it may be possible to learn about teachers' work lives through the investigation of teacher behavior and attitudes in an out-of-work setting. Group and individual behavior of teachers who habitually gathered at the same bar on Friday afternoons was observed in order to examine patterns of interaction and communication. The study concerned itself with behavioral and sociological issues such as territoriality, spatial relations, verbal and nonverbal communications, group interaction and interaction patterns, and behavioral norms. The results suggest that schools represent a type of structure that severely constrains adult interactive and socializing needs, but that those needs may be adequately met through the use of a setting like a "teachers' bar," a context which contains many of the same people but few of the same strictures as does the school environment. (LH)

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J. J. O'Keefe's: A Participant - Observation Study of Teachers in a Bar on Friday Afternoon

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From February, 1979 to the end of April, 1979, participant - observation data was gathered on Friday afternoons in one bar known as a "teacher bar". For the purpose of this study a teacher bar may be defined as a bar that is well known to teachers in a particular location as a place to frequent on Fridays after school. This study is reported in three parts: the physical setting; the character of the verbal interaction that occured; and the set of behavioral norms that appeared to govern the interaction patterns that took place.

In studying the bar setting of J.J. O'Keefe's it was important to learn the nature and meaning of the standard patterns of behavior. Behavior that may be taken for granted by the participants may give new information to the researcher. This is suggested by Cavan (1966, p. 6) as the insider's perspective of the setting. The verbal interaction and behavior patterns of this setting reflect both substantive and theoretical issues that evolved from this research. Data was collected relating specifically to the bar setting of J.J. O'Keefe's. Theoretically, questions were explored relating to the work life of teachers outside of school and the dynamics of the interaction that occurred between teachers within a framework of generality. Bogdan and Taylor (1975, p. 26) emphasize that qualitative methods are distinguished from quantitative measurement in that "the participant observer's questions are framed in general terms".

Contrary to what one might expect the behavior of teachers within a bar setting may also reflect the manner in which teachers think and feel about school. Typically, behavior in a bar may be viewed as leisure time. For the teachers observed in this study, Fridays after

school at J.J. O'Keefe's held a greater significance and meaning.

Setting

J.J. O'Keefe's is easily accessible from schools in the city of Syracuse, New York and the surrounding suburbs. It is located in a shopping center where free parking is readily available. This bar had recently been remodeled and has a large floor area for milling and round cocktail tables with 2-3 stools for patrons' use. Contributing to the milieu of the setting were Tiffany styled lighting, heavy dark wood trim, spiraled stairs leading to the balcony eating area which overlooked the wide open space below. The bar was strategically located so that patrons entering could focus on that area. There were also sufficient adjacent seats located along the bar.

Special Effects

As in a well planned movie in which special effects help create the atmosphere and setting, the same seems to be true of J.J. O'Keefe's. The music is turned on before the arrival of the teachers and the lights are dimmed. The number of bartenders is increased from one to four and three cocktail waitresses are also available. The coolers and ice machine are all filled to capacity; the liquor and beer supply has been replenished, and the stage is set for the arrival of the teachers.

Open-Closed Territory

It was not uncommon to enter J.J. O'Keefe's at 3:00 and find a minimum of 8 patrons all seated at the bar. In contrast to this, by 5:00 the entire bar and closed areas, tables with bar stools, were completely utilized. The open space, milling area, located between the bar and tables could be characterized as a neutral zone. The neutral zone was a space in which the teachers entered and could selectively choose a

number of alternatives for socializing. One could go directly to the bar, stay within the milling area, enter a group in the closed area, or decide to exit from J.J. O'Keefe's.

The large open floor space located in the center of the bar was a neutral area in which milling among the teachers was common. Individual teachers would move through this neutral zone searching for people with whom they were familiar. Small temporary groups were formed which would only last for a short duration. When someone broke off their contact, they either continued milling or entered a group in the closed area in which they were a member. The number of teachers in the open milling area typically increased as established groups took over the closed area of tables and stools.

Closed Space

The closed space was the area within the bar where the teachers formed intimate groups. There were eight cocktail tables which the teachers would sit at with other members of their respective school faculty. Surrounding each table were four stools. Additional stools were usually taken from the bar when more seating was desired around a particular table. Less movement took place within the closed area of cocktail tables. Once an individual joined a group around a table, the individual and group remained in that area.

The formation of groups within the closed area took place between 3:30 and 4:30. Regulars at J.J. O'Keefe's found their territory within the closed space at specific round tables. They formed the nucleus of a group that would be expanded as additional teachers from specific schools entered the bar. The number of teachers increased around each cocktail table as additional bar stools were added. As bar stools were

completely occupied, a specific group around a particular table could still increase in size by late arrivals occupying standing space adjacent to the stools. The bar management facilitated less movement within the closed area by providing the service of cocktail waitresses to take orders and remove empty glasses.

Character of Verbal Interaction

In addition to the nature of the physical setting, the character of the verbal interactions provided the substance of the data that was collected for the study of teacher behavior related to the work setting. Observation and data collection periods typically ranged in length from two to two and one-half hours, once a week on Friday afternoons. Initially the researchers began collecting data by listening, milling, and carrying on incidental conversation with the teachers at the bar and in the open area. It was more difficult to gain entry into the groups in the closed areas. This situation was resolved when the researchers found casual acquaintances and explained to them the research that was being undertaken. These acquaintances provided the initial entry to the closed groups. At first the members of the group were hesitant, but as the researchers explained their intent, and assured confidentiality, participation continued by group members. Data was gathered through passive participation within the groups. Typically, the researchers did not actively join the conversation. They participated only when directly addressed.

As a teacher enters J.J. O'Keefe's he/she indicates by their presence that they are open to socializing with others. Teachers coming to the bar on Friday afternoons were seeking a release from the tension accumulated during the work week as indicated by the nature of the verbal interactions. Cavan (1966) also speaks to the entrance of

patrons into a bar as passing through a "symbolic door". Those who come through indicate they are ready for interaction with others as long as they choose to stay. This appeared to be true for the teachers at J.J. O'Keefe's as well.

The types of conversation that took place were of a non-competitive nature. No one attempted to increase their status as a teacher, but rather to limit the social distance between each other as typically experienced in the schools. These observations are comparable to Lortie's (1975) description of teachers as feeling lonely and isolated. Lortie further explains the isolation of teachers caused by the "cellular" organization of schools which retards rather than enhances collegiality. The interactions observed at J.J. O'Keefe's appeared to represent a focused attempt at sharing frustrations, feelings, and common experiences. The teachers seemed to be seeking a level of understanding that could not be obtained during the normal school day.

The content of most conversations was typically concerned with issues the teacher had faced during the week and seemed to be unresolved in their mind. These issues were brought to light with the teacher describing the incident and those listening acknowledging comprehension and identification with the situation. Teachers typically described the problem of school with much humor and laughter. However, in many instances this seemed inappropriate. For example, one teacher described young students coming to school without proper clothing for winter weather, disrupted family life, and emotional depriviation. These factors were cited as overwhelming any positive, long lasting effort that could take place on the part of the teacher. Discussions of this type represented a way of "letting go" and releasing tension and stress the teacher typically experienced.

These factors relate to Jackson's (1968) research concerning interpersonal interchanges with students. He stated that there is a here and now urgency and spontaneous quality that may contribute to the fatigue the teacher feels at the end of each day. This would be intensified by the end of the work week as Jackson (1968) also cites that teachers may engage in as many as 1,000 interpersonal interchanges with students each day. The intensity of the teachers' emotional investment often can exceed the common concern for their students to the point that they may neglect their own emotional needs. The character of the verbal interactions at J.J. O'Keefe's represented a way of "getting out of their system" the feelings of tension and frustration related to their work with students. Teachers shared with each other instances of interchanges with students. In some cases, the instances may have been comical or very serious in nature. Regardless of the seriousness of the situation, the teacher could typically expect and find understanding and acceptance for each incident that was shared. In hearing others discuss a frustrating circumstance relating to school, teachers could be encouraged to share their own experiences no matter how trival or serious.

These conversations and episodes the teachers shared about their school situations were accepted by the group. There was no competing or one-upmanship during the conversation. The teachers would tell of a situation in its entirety and because the experience belonged to them there were no disputes or arguing. The conversation seemed to act as a therapeutic release.

Conversations of this nature also included reactions to school policy decisions. In addition to feelings and frustrations concerning students, there were also exchanges concerning internal school conflict

that may have affected the teachers directly or indirectly. For example, school administration was often cited as a source of frustration and as failing to give needed support. During the first hour individual vignettes were often shared and handled in a matter-of-fact way. This first hour seemed to be a time "to get things off your chest and laugh". Conversation of this type most often took place around tables in the closed area. In most cases these conversations were carried on by teachers from a particular school who were also familiar with each other and could easily relate to the students and circumstances in a particular school building.

As researchers we asked why these professionals were in a bar on Friday afternoon discussing the school events of the past week? Why didn't these teachers go home to their private life and/or families?

Recent research by Lortie (1975) indicates that the initial attraction for most teachers is the opportunity to work with people. The nature of the conversations gave support to the idea that this need is not being met satisfactorily as suggested by Jarvis (1979) and Lortie (1975), who depicted teachers as feeling lonely and isolated. Friday afternoons at J.J. O'Keefe's provided a setting where teachers could communicate and satisfy the need to interact with other adults who would understand the nature of their concerns. The time on Friday afternoons also provided the teachers with an acceptable way to admit and share emotions. Jersild as early as 1955 also cited the fact that "there are few unforbidden, frank, and direct channels for expressing hostility in education" (p. 9). Closely tied to the concern of dealing appropriately with hostility is even a greater question of coming to terms with one's emotions. Perhaps Friday afternoons at J.J. O'Keefe's provided these

teachers with professionally accepted ways to gain insight into their own emotions and to enable them as individuals to draw more freely upon their feelings than they can possibly accomplish within the confines of the actual work setting of the school. The fact that this happens on Friday afternoons also gives support to the idea that the conversations that took place provided a type of closure to the work week. Freuderberger (1977) gives further support by explaining that the professional feels the absence of the opportunity to experience completion. Teachers at J.J. O'Keefe's by the nature of the verbal interactions were providing a type of closure to their own work week.

Behavioral Norms/Interaction Patterns

Certain behavioral characteristics appeared to become norms established by the teachers during periods of observation by the researchers. Initially, one had to be a teacher to even participate in the conversations at J.J. O'Keefe's. Being in the teaching profession could be looked upon as an entrance factor as far as participating in any groups that evolved. One could not be expected to understand the interactions that took place, if in fact, you were not closely tied to the teaching profession.

The nucleus of a group would form at the bar with one or two teachers. As more of their colleagues arrived they would move to a cocktail table. When more members entered the bar, the teachers already there would summon them to the already established group. Once the groups were formed the teachers typically remained with the group throughout their stay. There was no cross interaction among groups. However, teachers would leave or join a group throughout the evening.

The majority of the teachers arrived between four and five o'clock which also coincided with a "happy hour" where drinks could be purchased,

two for the price of one. By providing a "happy hour" the bar management helped to create the appropriate setting for the interaction patterns that would take place. Two drinks for the price of one would encourage individuals to consume alcoholic beverages that would facilitate relaxed, friendly, talkative, uninhibited behavior. These behavioral patterns would be less likely to occur within the work setting of the school. Teachers could step out of their expected role and still maintain their professionalism because the majority of patrons at J.J. O'Keefe's recognized themselves as teachers.

The incidents and situations that were typically accepted by the teachers for discussion focused on events of the past. The teachers did not encourage each other to talk about themselves personally or did they seem to expect feedback about their present behavior. Likewise, the future was not a main concern in the conversation. When a teacher was talking he/she controlled the atmosphere and direction the group would move emotionally. The speaker also had the liberty to be as animated as deemed necessary to stress their point. Most discussion of this nature was carried on in the closed areas around the cocktail tables. The climate was totally supportive of the speaker. This setting provided teachers with the opportunity to interact more freely with their colleagues than they are able to do within the school. Cavan (1966) also speaks to the nature of interaction patterns in bars by explaining that such unserious settings do not "carry with it consequences that go beyond the immediate moment" (p. 12). These individuals could more freely step out of their expected role as a teacher without committing themselves to any particular behavioral patterns beyond the immediate time in the bar.

Gibb (1961) categorizes the behaviors of supportive climates as being induced by "description, problem orientation, spontaneity, empathy, equality, and provisionalism". These behaviors seemed to be characteristic of the nature of the conversations that took place at J.J. O'Keefes by the teacher's. These behaviors were important in establishing the climate in which the teachers felt free enough to communicate with each other in a manner that is not part of the norm of the everyday school setting.

The teachers at J.J. O'Keefe's could choose to be more or less actively involved in the discussion. They had only occasionally to acknowledge verbally or by nodding that they understood and empathized with a particular situation. This behavior was enough to allow them to remain a member of one of the groups. There did not seem to be a requirement that you must verbally participate. Non-verbal behavior very often reinforced the non-competitive nature of the conversation that took place.

For the teacher to be involved in meaningful interaction they needed to be in close proximity of each other. The less physical distance between the teachers, the greater the social interaction. The teachers in the open milling area had the opportunity for the close physical distance but the social interaction did not increase. The behavior in this area was more congenial and polite, but did not have the genuine social interaction that the established groups seemed to encourage. The majority of the teachers who frequented J.J. O'Keefe's tended to gravitate toward the closed areas and the formation of groups.

The importance of peer interaction has been investigated by Knoblock and Goldstein (1971), who found a desperate almost panicky need for interaction with other adults. The teachers at J.J. O'Keefe's appeared to be

fulfilling the need to interact with other adults who could readily relate to circumstances that may have occured in their own work setting.

Conclusions

The role of the teacher in the school work setting can be described as confined by the expectations of parents, students, and historical traditions. However, it seems that within the bar setting, the teacher is able to shed these confining restraints and feel free to express a greater range of emotions and socialize in a way not possible within the school. Teachers repeatedly attended J.J. O'Keefe's on Friday afternoons in order to seek the opportunity to be heard and understood by their colleagues in a way that was not possible within the work setting of the school. At the teacher bar one could, in effect, become detached from the role of teaching and engage in behavior to meet one's own professional and personal needs.

This research was undertaken with the idea that it may be possible to learn about the teacher's life at work through the investigation of an out of school setting. The information collected helped to better understand the teacher's work life. One might conclude that the bar setting represents everything the school is not. The teacher bar offers the opportunity to relinquish one's role as a teacher and engage in less serious behavior. The school setting seldom offers teachers the chance to engage in behavioral patterns not consistent with one's role. In effect, the setting of J.J. O'Keefe's offered teachers a brief time at the conclusion of the work week where they could step out of character. Teachers were able to find an acceptable manner in which stress and feelings of frustration could be openly expressed without fear of retribution.

Some final thoughts are in order. They are related to a common response from teachers at the bar when queried, in passing, about why they were there: "It's Friday afternoon and we're free!" This should not be taken to suggest that the teachers at J.J. O'Keefe's found their work distasteful. Rather, our interpretation is that schools represent a task and a type of structure that constrains adult interactive and socializing needs. The possibility exists that many teachers need to deal with their feelings about their work and the organizational constraints that accompany it in an atmosphere that is in sharp contrast to the work-setting but which contains many of the same people. The teacher bar studied here seemed to serve that purpose, at least for numbers of teachers observed.

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